

# Neoliberalism and the Novel

Edited by  
Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl

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# Neoliberalism and the Novel

The novel form has long been connected to modern capitalism and is, arguably, the literary genre most prominently enmeshed in contemporary global markets. Yet, as many critics have suggested about capital, something has changed in the last forty years. With the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant global economic rationality and mode of governance, the experience of capital has produced new ways of seeing and relating to the world, leading, as David Harvey observes, to “the financialization of everything”. The novel, indexed to capital in myriad ways, then, must similarly have been transformed.

*Neoliberalism and the Novel* investigates both those changes wrought to the novel form by changing arrangements of capital, and the novel’s broader engagement with neoliberalism itself. The chapters in this book consider these questions from a variety of angles, attending to the way in which the neoliberal novel deploys familiar generic patterns as a site from which to offer critique; examining the changing operation of labour and time under neoliberalism and its effect on novel form; and offering a broader call for new reading and interpretative practices to respond to changing socio-economic realities.

This book was originally published as a special issue of *Textual Practice*.

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# Contents

<i>Citation Information</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction: reading and writing the economic present <i>Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl</i>	1
1. The betrayals of neoliberalism in Shyam Selvadurai's <i>Funny Boy</i> <i>Emily S. Davis</i>	15
2. Margaret Atwood's dystopic fiction and the contradictions of neoliberal freedom <i>Chris Vials</i>	35
3. Neoliberalism and the limits of the human: Rawi Hage's <i>Cockroach</i> <i>Kit Dobson</i>	55
4. Reading alongside the market: affect and mobility in contemporary American migrant fiction <i>Pieter Vermeulen</i>	73
5. The banal conviviality of neoliberal cosmopolitanism <i>Emily Johansen</i>	95
6. Managed risk and the lure of transparency in Anglophone African detective noir <i>Matthew J. Christensen</i>	115
7. The zero hour of the neoliberal novel <i>Alissa G. Karl</i>	135
8. Neoliberalism and the time of the novel <i>Mathias Nilges</i>	157
<i>Index</i>	179

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## Chapter 1

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*Margaret Atwood's dystopic fiction and the contradictions of neoliberal freedom*

Chris Vials

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## Chapter 3

*Neoliberalism and the limits of the human: Rawi Hage's Cockroach*

Kit Dobson

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*Reading alongside the market: affect and mobility in contemporary American migrant fiction*

Pieter Vermeulen

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**Chapter 5**

*The banal conviviality of neoliberal cosmopolitanism*

Emily Johansen

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**Chapter 6**

*Managed risk and the lure of transparency in Anglophone African detective noir*

Matthew J. Christensen

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**Chapter 7**

*The zero hour of the neoliberal novel*

Alissa G. Karl

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**Chapter 8**

*Neoliberalism and the time of the novel*

Mathias Nilges

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This introduction to the issue offers an overview of current debates on neoliberalism as it relates to the contemporary novel. Distinguishing it from the novel of globalisation and the cosmopolitan novel, we suggest that the neoliberal novel is one particularly attuned to the economic rationalities of its time; it signals an attention to the ways novels circulate in an economic and geopolitical field and a consideration of the apparatus that structures the exchange and distribution of texts. We argue that the neoliberal novel is as much about methods and priorities of reading as it is about mimesis, thematics, or content. We also consider the way that, in addition to making visible the transformation of neoliberal economic values into cultural norms, the neoliberal novel is implicated in forms of power and the consent they require. Rather than seeing the multiple paths of the contemporary novel as signs of its superfluity or its capitulation to capital, this special issue attends to how this multiplicity of purpose demonstrates a response to the capacious mobility of neoliberalism itself.

In a 2008 review of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, Zadie Smith outlines the contemporary crisis of the novel and two potential paths forward, one exemplified by each novel. Smith notes that, for the contemporary novel, 'the last man standing is the Balzac-Flaubert model [of which *Netherland* is emblematic], on the evidence of its extraordinary persistence', but she asks, 'is it really the closest model we have to our condition? Or simply the bedtime story that comforts us most'?<sup>2</sup> As Smith's language here makes clear, she is sceptical of the aestheticising tendencies of novels written in the lyrical realist mode – a mode in which she locates some of her own work. Smith's sense of the genre-in-crisis is just one of many reflections on the state of the novel that index anxieties about what cultural forms mean today, how we ought to study them, and the relationship of both to current economic rationalities. More to the point for our purposes here is the analogous way in which Smith's description of the 'persistence' of the lyrical realist novel echoes the oft-heard assertion of neoliberal capital's ubiquity and teleological inevitability.

The novel has long been considered a thoroughly sociable genre, mapping the worlds in which we live, the symbolic forms by which we abide, the maturation of subjects, and the land and property on which they subsist. It has also been prominently connected with the rise of liberal capitalism – most prominently in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* and Georg Lukács' *The Historical Novel* – so it is not surprising that the novelistic form typically associated with the rise of the genre (the realist novel) is referenced, here by Smith, in the same totalising and universalising way we often speak about capitalism. But we would like to assert that it is this very sociability, and specifically sociability under capital, that renders the novel such an appropriate venue for the interrogation of what Smith calls 'our condition' under neoliberal orthodoxy – and this is nothing less than the 'condition', as the essays collected here elaborate, of our bodies, lived environments, labour, temporality and collective institutions. And these conditions – what we focus on here as those tied to the policies and ideologies of neoliberalism – are not the same as those of the liberal, classical capitalism that Watt, Lukács and others connect to the novel's historical rise.

It is now fairly routine to note that neoliberal capitalism, or neoliberalism plain and simple, is a notoriously slippery and capacious signifier.<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Gilbert is right in asking in the title of his introduction to a recent special issue of *New Formations* on 'Neoliberal Culture', 'What Kind of Thing Is "Neoliberalism"?'<sup>4</sup> Gilbert then proceeds to expand upon a number of political, intellectual and historical manifestations that we might designate 'neoliberal'; without replicating Gilbert's project, it seems worthwhile to briefly (and thus necessarily only partially)

identify some key valences and historical developments by which the 'neoliberal' turn of the past forty or so years is constituted. We can speak, then, of neoliberalism as an economic dogma and political rationale that holds that free markets and competition will produce the best outcomes for the most people. This tenet often presumes and produces scenarios of radical individualism and self-proprietorship that are predicated upon this competitive ethos. 'Neoliberalism' also often refers to specific, state policy interventions in the economy such as the privatisation of state or public resources, the curtailment of state welfare provisions, deregulation of trade and labour markets, and state initiatives to weaken organised labour. Such state-sponsored measures are also enforced around the world via international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Often coordinated with such governmental policies is neoliberalism's corporate variant, under which firms and finance have renovated labour pacts and financial transactions across the globe. Often in collaboration with governments, corporations engage in a 'race to the bottom' seeking the least expensive, just-in-time and flexible labour arrangements, the lowering of trade barriers and avoidance of corporate regulation and tax liability – all of which are rationalised by the presumption that more (and hypothetically, but often not practically, more competitive) market activity will make everyone better off.

The term 'neoliberalism' thus evinces an overlap of policy and paradigm – indeed, an inextricability of the two that, we claim, is not as pervasive under other recent economic orthodoxies (say, those of welfare capitalism or Keynesianism). The final valence of the neoliberal designation that we will note here addresses this particular overlap in that it names a saturation of all spheres of human activity by a market logic; as Wendy Brown puts it, '[n]eoliberal rationality ... *involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*'.<sup>5</sup> While we might support or contest individual initiatives that smack of a neoliberal valorisation of 'competition' (NAFTA, the privatisation of your local water authority, or the US tournament for educational funding under No Child Left Behind), the imagination of social life as a market is likely not an ideological position that any of us have formally validated or rejected. And while the contributors to this issue elaborate upon various of the aforementioned senses of 'neoliberalism', this last one – the ubiquity of a market logic – might be that which provokes the aforementioned proclamations of a neoliberal *telos*. Indeed, as Fredric Jameson has noted, and as some of our essays repeat, 'it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism'.<sup>6</sup>

Although the designation 'neoliberal' covers such a broad field, we follow Gilbert's refutation of the claim that neoliberalism cannot be

used as an analytical optic because it is 'an incoherent concept with no objective referent'.<sup>7</sup> And while the essays in Gilbert's 'Neoliberal Cultures' volume certainly provide a wide-ranging explication of the above-named vectors of neoliberalism, we propose the novel as one historically specific means of interrogating and understanding neoliberalism in its various manifestations. Specifically, we hold that the novel's imbrication in and contiguity with the history of capitalism provides a unique occasion to similarly uncover and historicise the economic paradigms of the present – particularly as neoliberalism is notoriously good at hiding behind a 'common sense' ethic of competition and individualism, and exploiting a commonplace historical association of market capitalism with representative democracy and other widely acknowledged public 'goods'.

Our aim, however, is twofold, because even while we stake out the novel as an especially useful analytical object, we also ask what the conditions of neoliberalism mean for the novel as a genre and as a set of cultural forms. If the characteristics we associate with the genre emerged, to use Foucauldian categories, under the disciplinary episteme, how is the novel different in the transition to neoliberal biopower? Have particular generic changes emerged? Or has the transformation been more invisible, re-framing existing characteristics in ways that reinforce the assumptions of neoliberal capital? The essays in this special issue collectively posit that there has, in fact, been a variety of both formal and thematic changes in the genre that speak to the epistemic changes under capital in its current incarnation, and that these produce new relations between subject and genre, materiality and form. We would therefore answer Zadie Smith's query about whether we have a novelistic form appropriate to our contemporary conditions in the affirmative, but how exactly the novel models, integrates, or interrupts the social and ideological norms of the neoliberal present remains an open question (and indeed a source of anxiety for the genre-in-crisis crowd) that this special issue begins to address.

### **The Contemporary novel and Enmeshed critique**

Smith asserts that the novel's interruption of present social norms comes from the resolute immanence of works such as Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* while contributor Pieter Vermeulen has elsewhere posited the disruptive potential of texts such as David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, with its 'depiction of our globalised contemporaneity [that] rigorously refuses a privileged perspective or a unifying voice'.<sup>8</sup> Both modes echo Jacques Rancière's claim that the politics of literature is that which 'intervenes in the relationship between practices and forms of visibility and modes of

saying that carves up one or more common worlds', redistributing the perceptible.<sup>9</sup> Under such a paradigm, the novel seems to be, almost necessarily, a document of social resistance. As we have seen, however, one of the most characteristic elements of neoliberalism is its seemingly monolithic ability to encompass and appropriate nearly all aspects of everyday life. It is potentially naïve, then, to assume that the novel somehow avoids recapitulating the ideologies in which it is necessarily enmeshed. This tension between the contestatory, political possibilities of the novel and its aestheticisation of 'the twenty-first-century bourgeois's political apathy'<sup>10</sup> undergirds the examination of the novel in this special issue. In designating the 'neoliberal novel', we thus attempt to conceptualise a body of writing not fully accounted for by oversimplified models of resistance or capitulation, or by models of national or diasporic literature. We follow, then, from Rita Barnard's call for the identification of the 'emergent fictions of the global ... where we might find a new kind of plot, with new coordinates of time and space that may serve as a corollary to the brave neo world of millennial capitalism'. For Barnard, this means moving away from forms already theorised: 'the novel of transnational migration ... and the colonial bildungsroman [which] seem to have become rather stale today, as have the usual ways of accounting for them'.<sup>11</sup> This very staleness might be linked to the ubiquity of vague assertions about the globalised nature of contemporary life that circulate widely, both inside and outside of academic criticism. We offer the pairing of neoliberalism and the novel as a way of specifying and thus reinvigorating the study of the novel of the present, and interrogating the economic rationalities by which it is suffused and naturalised. This is not to say, then, that the neoliberal novel is characterised by a radical break in form and content; rather, the neoliberal novel signals an attention to the way novels circulate in an economic and geopolitical field and a consideration of the apparatus that structures the exchange and distribution of texts. This is arguably true of all books: not just fiction and not just the novels that seem to reference or recapitulate neoliberal values. The designation of the neoliberal novel also, then, contains within itself a sense of the criticism it requires.

This critical attention to the economic vectors shaping the genre distinguishes the neoliberal novel from two other prominent ways of classifying the contemporary transnational Anglophone novel: the novel of globalisation and the cosmopolitan novel. Susanne Rohr suggests that the novel of globalisation depicts a 'fictional reality of disorientation, insecurity and imbalance within the bounds of a seemingly known and familiar world';<sup>12</sup> such a novel illustrates forms of alienation that are neither the 'wild modernist aesthetic experiment nor ... anarchic post-modernist playfulness'.<sup>13</sup> James Annesley similarly indexes the descriptive potential of the novel of globalisation to its political possibility: the extent to which a text

can be read as a 'novel of globalization' depends on whether 'the text can be said to reflect known conditions but [also] on [the] analysis of the extent to which it adds to knowledge about and understanding of the discourses and debates around globalization'.<sup>14</sup> Annesley goes on to distinguish between a 'novel *of* globalization' and a 'novel *about* globalization'<sup>15</sup> – a distinction that centres on a text's explicit articulation of a 'dialectical relationship with the conditions of globalization'.<sup>16</sup> Both Rohr and Annesley designate the 'novel of globalization' as that which somehow reproduces the everyday realities of globalised life. This is to, perhaps, return mimetic realism to the forefront of discussions of the novel's interactions with global systems and rationalities. Under this rubric, the novel reflects upon and recognises – critically or not – the everyday experience of globalisation through its realistic depiction of the global connections that structure contemporary experience in a variety of ways.

A related category is that of the 'cosmopolitan novel'. Berthold Schoene theorises the contemporary cosmopolitan novel as the updated version of Benedict Anderson's national novel, suggesting 'it is the contemporary ... novel as *tour du monde*, as a practice of communal world-narration ... Nothing less, in fact, than the world as a whole will do as the imaginative reference point, catchment area and addressee of the cosmopolitan novel'.<sup>17</sup> The formal elements that Schoene identifies posit a different form of globalised mimeticism:

cosmopolitan narration assembles as many as possible of the countless segments of our being-in-common into a momentarily composite picture of the world [and] proceeds without erasing the essential incongruousness or singularity of these individual segments, which are left intact, even though they remain subject to continual re-assessment.<sup>18</sup>

Schoene's affinity with Rohr's and Annesley's theorisation of the novel of globalisation is clear; however, what distinguishes his vision of the contemporary novel is its explicit planetarity, its transparent geographical incorporation of the globe as a whole. Spatiality, rather than temporality, becomes key, then, in this vision of the contemporary novel and mimesis;<sup>19</sup> but as some of the essays that follow in this collection make clear, an attentiveness to the logics of neoliberalism opens up an additional set of parameters for thinking spatiality (as, for example, Alissa Karl's essay here demonstrates).

Such designations of the contemporary novel as globalised or cosmopolitan make important claims about what the novel does – or can do – in its current incarnations and conditions. Yet, outside of their careful initial theorisations, these categories can too easily be used to translate market

values into cultural norms when broadly and indiscriminately applied; this is to say that the economic imperatives that celebrate and encourage the global circulation of texts and people become coded as cultural heterogeneity. Both the globalised and the cosmopolitan novel are framed as forms of critique, but this can paradoxically obscure their own internalisation of the values of their particular socio-historical moment. As Jeffrey Nealon pithily observes, the relation between the realms of postmodern cultural and neoliberal economic production is 'one logic, smeared across a bunch of discourses'.<sup>20</sup> This 'smearing' makes 'neoliberal' a useful category and optic for analysis because the term reminds us that cultural forms generated under its auspices are predicated upon and presume the tropes of today's dominant political economy, without necessarily submitting to them. We furthermore venture that the related terminologies of cosmopolitanism, globalism, transnationalism and the state, while highly useful, do not constitutively presume this same imbrication that results in overlapping thematic and formal negotiations with the economic present. In other words, what we might specify as 'neoliberal' about our approach to recent novels is our awareness of such texts' self-conscious reliance on the conditions that the texts might themselves trouble. This volume thus attempts to use such historical self-consciousness as a platform for what Nealon calls 'periodizing the present – construct[ing] a vocabulary to talk about the "new economies" ... and their complex relations to cultural production in the present moment, where capitalism seems nowhere near the point of its exhaustion'.<sup>21</sup> Nealon thus articulates a critical development that, while it might incorporate the priorities of cosmopolitan, transnational, global and nation-state studies, probes the enmeshment of culture and economics in a way that these fields as yet have not. Put another way, the neoliberal novel is as much (if not more) about methods and priorities of reading as it is about mimesis, thematics or content – methods and priorities upon which transnational and cosmopolitan studies touch, but that are not fully central to their analysis.

### **The novel and the neoliberal state**

If, on one hand, the neoliberal novel and criticism of it expose its enmeshment in the transformation of neoliberal economic policies into cultural norms (and thus suggest links between economics and culture), it is also implicated in the forms of power and the consent they require. This is to recognise, then, the interplay between particularly statist forms of coercion and consent; we might specify such an interplay between the subject and the state, or ask whether the capitulation to economic logics and their social rationales is inevitable or not. In his account of neoliberalism, David



Harvey follows Antonio Gramsci's articulation of 'common sense' and its role in the creation of consent, and observes that 'once the state apparatus made the neoliberal turn it could use its powers of persuasion, co-optation, bribery, and threat to maintain the climate of consent necessary to perpetuate its power'.<sup>22</sup> Harvey posits that such consent 'required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism'.<sup>23</sup> This creation of interconnected consent by governmental and cultural means points to the oscillating tension under neoliberalism between the state and the individual.

Yet, as Wendy Brown observes, state sovereignty in the forms that Harvey identifies with the policies of the Thatcher and Reagan regimes has decayed in a variety of ways:

nation-state sovereignty has been undercut ... by neoliberal rationality, which recognizes no sovereign apart from entrepreneurial decision makers (large and small), which displaces legal and political principles (especially liberal commitments to universal inclusion, equality, liberty, and the rule of law) with market criteria, and which demotes the political sovereign to managerial status.<sup>24</sup>

Brown goes on to note that 'what appears at first blush as the articulation of state sovereignty [the building of border walls] actually expresses its diminution relative to other kinds of global forces – the waning relevance and cohesiveness of the form'.<sup>25</sup> While Brown does not suggest that the state-as-form has ceased to mediate between the subject and collective, she and others including Colin Crouch do point out – tellingly in the post-2008 economic crash moment – the ways in which the state has become an increasingly ambiguous and ambivalent point of articulation for subject formation in response to neoliberal hegemony. As commentators have observed, the global economic crisis of 2008 pointed to a moment where one might have expected a re-thinking of neoliberal consensus but a further affirmation and commitment to this consensus occurred instead.<sup>26</sup> As Emily Davis's contribution to this issue illustrates, neoliberalism has long been tied to anxious connections between subject and state, self and group. In her reading of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Davis argues that the novel carefully links neoliberal commodities and programmes of 'structural adjustment' with modalities of identity such as sexuality, gender, ethnicity and class. The displacement of neoliberal rationalities by identity politics, Davis suggests, obscures the perpetuation of neoliberal consensus in its focus on hyper-individualised narratives of self-actualisation.